

## Mr Nice Guy

What does running a police force have in common with enhancing standards in the medical profession? Plenty, says **Sandy Forrest**, first head of the Council for the Regulation of Healthcare Professionals

Although doctors do not see the General Medical Council as a body that is "on their side," outsiders have complained for years that it smacks of an "old boys' club" that fails to put patients first.

Such was the thinking behind the Kennedy report into heart surgery at Bristol Royal Infirmary, which recommended the establishment of an overarching body to regulate all the health professions (*BMJ* 2001;323:181). The new council would send a message to doctors that if they wanted to retain self regulation, the GMC would have to become part of a larger organisation, which could keep an eye on it.

Now the new body—the Council for the Regulation of Healthcare Professionals—is in place and its director is due to take up his post in two weeks' time. Appropriately, many would say, the director turns out to be a serving police officer.

Until he takes over full time in mid-November, Sandy Forrest, aged 50, is Her Majesty's assistant inspector of constabulary for Scotland. Appointing someone with this background to oversee the regulation of the health professions could be seen as sending a rather heavy handed message. Forrest's response is to point out that there are many misconceptions about how senior police officers spend their time nowadays.

"Policing is about relationships and consensus building. Community planning and development is a lot of what we do today. We work with other partners to achieve this. It's a whole lot different from the authoritarian view that some people might have of policing."

Although the new council was created after a recommendation of the Kennedy report, the NHS Plan had already mooted the idea of a UK council of regulators, and Kennedy's interest catalysed its formation. Its purpose is to exercise independent oversight of the General

Medical Council and the eight other regulatory bodies that play a comparable role for healthcare professionals, including nurses, pharmacists, dentists, and chiropractors. Its principal concern is the interest of patients, and it reports not to the government but to parliament.

Set up last April, the new council will try to promote good practice in healthcare regulation. Although not itself a regulatory body, it could—as a last resort and subject to the agreement of parliament—impose its will by directing a member organisation to change its rules. But in this, as in all other issues, the ambition would be to reach a resolution by discussion.

In the case of some particular decision taken by a member body, the new council can refer the matter to court if it feels a judgment has been too lenient. Just as doctors can appeal to the High Court against an excessively severe GMC disciplinary ruling, so the new council—in its role as guardian of the public interest—can appeal against undue leniency. The right way to use this power in practice is currently the subject of a wide ranging consultation.

The new council's work is not all about overseeing the process of regulation. "Our role is also to work with the regulators to enhance the standards of the professions," says Forrest. On this, as on several other issues of detail, he defers to the new council's acting director, Isabel Nisbet. On secondment from the GMC, where she worked on its reform programme, Nisbet will continue as director until Forrest takes over.

As she explains, the new council is still working on the practicalities of boosting performance standards. And it is commissioning research into how the various bodies operate, because not all do so in the same way. The new council should act as a forum in which the regulator members—which already



COUNCIL FOR THE REGULATION OF HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

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swap experience informally—can make more formal arrangements to learn from each other. All nine have seats on the 19 strong council and will consequently, it is hoped, feel some degree of ownership.

What attracted Forrest to the job was the similarity—surprising though this may seem—to his existing one as an inspector of constabulary. Here too, he says, the public interest is the first consideration. "The job takes me around police forces seeing how well they're performing. Chief constables are constitutionally independent, so it's not a role in which you direct them to do things differently. You define a way forward and draw it to their attention. They're then under public pressure to acknowledge these changes and to pursue them." In other words he works with them rather than against them—which is how the new council intends to operate.

What personal qualities does he bring to the job? "I'm nice." As this bland reply was accompanied by a broad smile, I don't think I was supposed to take it entirely at face value. He enlarges: "Where there's politics you develop interpersonal skills that relate to the situation you're in. In my past I've dealt with government and with the public and with chief constables, and tried

to get the best out of these exchanges."

As Forrest concedes, this is hardly the stuff of television's *The Sweeney* or even *The Bill*. "You won't see a police TV series that reflects the partnerships aspect of police work. Most of our work is about going to meetings and agreeing a way forward. There's not a lot of adrenaline in that."

Forrest's degree was in geography and economics, and he admits that his original reason for joining the force was entirely negative—"an alternative to being a teacher or a town planner; neither of them appealed to me." He says he's greatly enjoyed his police career—even though, at the highest level, the work is not always unlike that of an area manager for Marks & Spencer. "But there's always that extra dimension to it. You still get to go out in a police suit, and the public aren't concerned with what braid you have. They come and ask you the same questions. So you can get the shop floor experience at any time."

And, in the new job, what of the inevitable jokes he'll face about handcuffs, charge sheets, and "policing the professions?" "I can live with that." Which is just as well because, for a while at least, he'll probably have to. □

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